New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1951

Volume XII, Number 14 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of June 25, 1951

1951 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years
Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1950 Vol.

Stage Play	Page
*Affairs of State	267
Arms and the Man	235
Bell, Book and Candle	206
Black Chiffon	261
Bless You All	170
*Call Me Madam	243
Captain Brassbound's Conversion	157
Cocktail Party (The)	376
Country Girl (The)	210
Enemy of the People (An)	154
*Guys and Dolls	185
*Happy Time (The)	370
King Lear	160
Lady's Not for Burning (The)	213
Member of the Wedding (The)	397
Out of This World	166
Pardon Our French	254
Peep Show	285
Peter Pan	306
Ring Round the Moon	189
*Season in the Sun	258
*Twentieth Century	163

1949 Vol.

Stage Play	Page
*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes	198
*South Pacific	312

1948 Vol.

Stage Play	Page
*Kiss Me, Kate	91
Mister Roberts	338
Where's Charley?	197

Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of June 25, 1951

1951 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres During 1951
Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	Page
Angel in the Pawnshop	380
Angels Kiss Me	297
Autumn Garden (The)	325
Billy Budd	353
*Courtin' Time	254
Cox and Box	341
*Darkness at Noon	388
Dream Girl	271
L'Ecole des Femmes	307
Flahooley	264
Four Twelves Are 48	384
Getting Married	268
Gondoliers (The)	351
*Gramercy Ghost	281
Green Bay Tree (The)	368
Green Pastures (The)	312
H.M.S. Pinafore	361
High Ground (The)	336
House of Bernarda Alba (The)	395
Idiot's Delight	260
Iolanthe	347
*King and I (The)	304
King of Friday's Men (The)	334
King Richard II	376
Little Blue Light (The)	278
Long Days (The)	288
*Make a Wish	294
Mary Rose	328
Mikado (The)	370
*Moon Is Blue (The)	322
Night Music	300
Not for Children	348
*Oklahoma!	257
Peer Gynt	373
Pirates of Penzance (The)	341
Razzle Dazzle	339
Romeo and Juliet	318
*Rose Tattoo (The)	363
Royal Family (The)	392
School for Wives (The)	307
Second Threshold	398
*Seventeen	250
Small Hours (The)	344
Springtime Folly	331
Springtime for Henry	315
*Stalag 17	274
Taming of the Shrew (The)	284
Ti-Coq	358
*Tree Grows in Brooklyn (A)	291
Trial by Jury	361

CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD 302

Theatre Openings
"Seventeen"

Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of June 25, 1951

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK TIMES

All Reviews copyrighted by the newspapers and reproduced by permission.

Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"Seventeen"

New York Post

June 22, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Pleasant Saga of Willie Baxter

The new musical comedy version of Booth Tarkington's affectionate saga of boyhood romance, "Seventeen," which opened at the Broadhurst Theater last night, is a pleasant and likeable summer entertainment, possessing the highly commendable virtues of modesty, taste and a complete lack of ostentation. There is certainly nothing breathtakingly brilliant about it, but there is something so engaging in its warm-hearted simplicity and its refusal to go in for pretentiousness that it emerges as a vastly agreeable and appealing girl-and-music show.

Sally Benson, who has a knack in these matters, has provided a book that captures a great deal of the authentic Tarkington spirit, and the story of callow young William Sylvanus Baxter's summertime crush on coquettish Lola Pratt, the visiting belle, never, unless my recollection is deceiving me, strays far from the mood and the letter of the original. Everything is unostentatious, including the 1907 Indiana atmosphere, with the result that the musical comedy "Seventeen" has an endearing quality of graciousness in its narrative.

Willie and Lola

There isn't much plot, and there shouldn't be. Willie Baxter is overwhelmed by the ingenue wiles of baby-talking Lola, gets terribly serious about her, dons his father's dress suit to impress her, encounters a successful rival in the person of a Yale man from Kansas, triumphs over the intruder at Lola's farewell ball, and is temporarily heart-broken when his dream girl leaves for home. It is all very simple and genuine, and there is a feeling of the remembrance of lost youth in its atmosphere and story-telling that is captured tenderly.

It is a young people's show, and the elders are kept properly in their place, but the grown-ups, too, have their moments. When sorely-tried Mr. Baxter, in a moment of exasperation, confesses to his wife that he can't stand his son, you have the amused and slightly rueful spirit of the minor American classic that is Booth Tarkington's "Seventeen" just as it should be. The adapter has kept quietly in the background, possibly to a somewhat too great degree, but, if she might have been a trifle more sprightly, she also never loses the proper mood.

The Production

The friendliness and affection that have gone into the telling of the Tarkington story have been extended to the other phases of the production. I can't say that either Walter Kent's songs or Kim Gannon's lyrics are exactly sparkling, and there is certainly a reminiscent ring to them, but they are always agreeable to listen to. Hassard Short's direction, Dania Krupska's staging of the modest dances, Stewart Chaney's sets and David Ffolkes' costumes are more concerned with fitting into the correct mood than in showing off, and they add to the pleasantness of the occasion.

Although the cast is a modest one, it is properly youthful, talented and lacking in the sort of brashness that might have ruined the proceedings. Ann Crowley has just the fluffy prettiness necessary to the role of Lola, and Kenneth Nelson as Willie Baxter has the proper note of callow innocence, while a nice young dancer named Helen Wood provides charm and skill as one of the Indiana girls. Frank Alberston is excellent as Mr. Baxter, and Alonzo Bosan, the wonderful Noah of "The Green Pastures," brings perfection to his one number. The musical "Seventeen" has honestly youthful charm.

"SEVENTEEN"

Musical comedy based on the novel by Booth Tarkington; book by Sally Benson; lyrics by Kim Gannon; music by Walter Kent; staged by Hassard Short; book directed by Richard Whorf; settings by Stewart Chaney; costumes by David Ffolkes; dances by Dania Krupska; presented by Milton Berle, Sammy Lambert and Bernie Foyer at the Broadhurst Theatre, June 21, 1951. The cast:

Genesis.....Maurice Ellis
Johnnie Watson....John Sharpe
Willie Baxter...Kenneth Nelson
Jane Baxter..Betty Jane Seagle
Bert.....Greg O'Brien
Charlie.....Jim Moore
Dave.....Bill Reilly
Joe Bullitt.....Dick Kallman
Lester.....Richard France
Darrell.....Darrell Notara
Don.....Bob Bakanic
Lola Pratt.....Ann Crowley
Mrs. Baxter.....Doris Dalton
May Parcher....Ellen McCown
Emmie.....Helen Wood
Ida.....Carol Cole
Madge.....Bonnie Brae
Sue.....Elizabeth Pacetti
Jenny.....Sherry McCutcheon
Nan.....Joan Bowman
Mr. Baxter....Frank Albertson
Mr. Parcher.....King Calder
Mrs. Parcher...Penny Bancroft
George Cooper..Harrison Muller
Mr. Genesis.....Alonzo Bosan

DAILY NEWS

June 22, 1951

Nice Young People, but Few Songs In Musical Version of 'Seventeen'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Once again, Newton Booth Tarkington's affectionate stories about Willie Baxter, the loon, Lola Pratt, the baby-talk lady, and Willie's poisonous little sister, Jane ,have been made the basis of a musical comedy. This show, "Seventeen," had its premiere last evening at the Broadhurst Theatre. If it only had some music it would be quite a nice show.

The musical comedy business is getting so elaborate with its settings by artists, direction of artists, lighting by artists and acting by more artists—not to mention financial backing by those greatest of all artists, the people who have a little money left over—that mere tunes are of small importance. And lyrics just don't count at all. So it is with "Seventeen." A good, time-tested plot by Tarkington, delightful sets by Stewart Chaney, a company of nice young people and a few excellent old people, charming dances staged by Dania Krupska, fine costumes by David Ffolkes, direction by Hassard Short and Richard Whorf, production by Milton Berle and two end men. . . . What could be better?

Without a Song.

I'll tell you what I think could be better, and that would be a show with some songs in it. Some tunes with enough words to come out even. Why go to the enormous trouble and expense of presenting a musical comedy if the music isn't the best part of the show? No hit in the history of this curious business ever succeeded on anything other than its songs, and I failed to hear any last evening. The composer, Walter Kent, and the lyrist, Kim Gannon, turned up one number out of their total batch of 13 that interested me—and it sounded so much like Disney's "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah" that I felt embarrassed for the authors.

"Seventeen," as anybody over 16 should know, is about how Willie Baxter goes crazy over Lola Pratt in Indianapolis in 1907. It is the "Pelleas et Melisande" of the comedy field, and even now it is pretty funny. Kenneth Nelson, as Willie, and Ann Crowley, as Lola, are most attractive young people, and all their youthful friends are pleasant, too. Particularly noticeable is Harrison Muller in the role of the smart-aleck who essays to steal Lola from Willie. Mr. Muller is good.

Bosan Scores Again.

Good, too, are some of the elders in the show, like Doris Dalton, Frank Albertson, King Calder and the wonderful Alonzo Bosan, whom I shall always remember as Noah in "The Green Pastures." Little Betty Jane Seagle is captivating as sister Jane, and two of the best actors in the layout are dogs which are not identified in the program.

I guess it must be hard to write songs. Hardly anybody is doing it these days, except a precious handful of old men like Porter, Berlin, Hammerstein and Rodgers and one comparatively young fellow, Loesser.

The New York Times

June 22, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Booth Tarkington's "Seventeen" has lost none of that old fond enchantment. Put on as a musical play at the Broadhurst last evening, it is still a touching and uproarious portrait of the torture of adolescence. Sally Benson has preserved the integrity of the old-fashioned fable. Richard Whorf, who directed the book, and Hassard Short, who has staged the entire production, have done their jobs also with taste, sympathy and relish.

Walter Kent's score does not seem so fresh and beguiling, nor are Kim Gannon's lyrics up to the high standard of the book. But perhaps that is a churlish comment. For two or three of the songs are joyous and lively, and they can be sung in a rousing spirit.

* * *

In less sensitive hands "Seventeen" might have degenerated into a clever vaudeville. But the actors who have been chosen for the parts are as honest and unhackneyed as the book and in their playing it is easy to recognize Booth Tarkington's story as the bourgeois counterpart of "Tom Sawyer" and "Huckleberry Finn." Willie Baxter, bogged down in his first love, is a pain in the neck to everybody; and Lola Pratt, with her egotism and baby-talk, is equally unbearable. But it was the genius of Booth Tarkington to recognize the torment they are going through, to enjoy their innocent blunders and to forgive them for the crime of being young. "Seventeen" is a minor literary classic. The musical play takes it on an equal level.

* * *

Let's all say a word of thanks to Kenneth Nelson and Ann Crowley for playing the leading parts so drily. Mr. Nelson is a slight, animated, desperately serious young man who, as Willie Baxter infected with puppy love, dies a thousand deaths over the crudeness of his family and the awful heartlessness of the adult world. Miss Crowley, as the adolescent coquette, is fantastically artificial—lisping, bridling and posing. Mr. Nelson and Miss Crowley make a wonderful pair of immature romantics. Their scenes together are genuine comedy, for there is something poignant in their awkward attachment to each other.

The casting and the acting are delightful all the way through. Harrison Muller as the precocious young swain from Yale; little Betty Jane Seagle as Willie's scornful baby sister; Ellen McCown and Dick Kallman as two hot-headed high-school kids—all play with the same taut excitement. For contrast, the adult parts are played with humorous understanding. King Calder's frustrated father of one of the neighborhood girls, and Doris Dalton and Frank Albertson as Willie's mother and father round out this portrait of youth with a mixture of amazement, vexation and love.

* * *

As Genesis, the colored family servant, and his venerable father, Maurice Ellis and Alonzo Bosan, respectively, play with a simple pity and loyalty that in one or two scenes are wonderfully affecting.

Everyone associated with "Seventeen" seems to have pitched in with the same enthusiastic good will. Dania Krupska's unsophisticated dance turns; Stewart Chaney's summery scenery, and David Ffolkes' chaste and sentimental costumes have caught the general mood of comedy, astonishment and compassion. For there is a lot of warm, human substance to Booth Tarkington's portrait of the ordeal of being young.

Since Willie and his associates are decent people, "Seventeen" is a clean show. Neither the original author nor his successors have had to be cynical or clever. For "Seventeen" is part of the universal truth, and no one has to tamper much with anything so lovable and delightful.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

June 22, 1951

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY Jr.

Tarkington With Music

THE new "Seventeen" at the Broadhurst is a pale ice cream musical about puppy love, with a few good tunes and a lot of artificial joy. Written by Sally Benson from the Booth Tarkington stories, this idyll about teen-aged Willie Baxter and the visiting siren from St. Louis has already appeared in film and stage versions. In its song-and-dance trappings it runs through the agonies of the dress suit and the fraternity pin with more eager accent on youth and less real sparkle than other recent comedies about high school America. Walter Kent's score gives it a lilt, but "Seventeen" is a flimsy satire, even for a summer show.

* * *

Stewart Chaney's sets and David Ffolkes's costumes dress up the stage to look like Indianapolis in 1907, and various young people come bouncing in under Hassard Short's direction telling Willie to get a wiggle on and looking generally like Broadway kids hard at work imitating the exuberant naivetes of the fraternity set. They sing about the drug store, about summer and about spring, and they are all pretty much in love. The more intimate details arranged by Miss Benson have to do with Willie's affection for Miss Lola Pratt, a blonde and baby-talking summer visitor, with a Yale man thrown in late in the first act when the teen-age joke has been hammered to exhaustion. It is all much too bouncy to believe, and without enough keenness or variety of humor to gain any great comic validity.

* * *

Kent's score maintains a sort of wistful verve, with group numbers like the waltz "Summertime is Summertime" or the lively solo "Reciprocity" sung by Ann Crowley as the plump and eyelash-fluttering Lola. The happiest combination of music and performance is "I Could Get Married Today," in which Alonzo Bosan as an old man piping his reminiscences stands out in a trio with Maurice Ellis as his son and Kenneth Nelson as Willie. Little of the rest of "Seventeen" is as amusing as this one interlude, though Miss Crowley poses as though she were made of sugar and Nelson makes angular leaps around her like a puppet suspended on wires. Theirs is a forced wooing; in it, as elsewhere, the effort is far more conspicuous than the material on which it bears.

Harrison Muller is properly and painfully arrogant as the Yale man, cutting up a fast take-off on a Ziegfeld Follies dance to the admiration of the teen-agers. Frank Albertson and Doris Dalton are a most pleasant couple as Willie's mother and father, the former's sarcasms and the latter's cool good nature being a grateful relief from the supercharged antics of the juveniles. Dania Krupska's dances give the impression of a lot of jumping around, and sometimes they are almost indistinguishable from the restless motions of the libretto under Richard Whorf's guiding hand. "Seventeen" is a breezy show, but it is more imitative than fresh, more exaggerated than witty. It supposes that to be young and to be in a state of infatuation is automatically hilarious; but, without the insight and subtlety to develop this theme, such is unfortunately not the case.

Journal American

June 22, 1951

New Musical Opens At the Broadhurst

By ROBERT GARLAND

It was the sage of Ayot St. Lawrence who insisted that youth is too good for young people. He may be right. Last night, at the Broadhurst, Bernard Shaw kept coming into mind. For whatever it was that caused Booth Tarkington's "Seventeen" to be revived, the result was Shavian.

Never have young people worked so hard to be young. No one in the company, with the exception of papa, mama, and a sort of uncle from the neighborhood, is evergrown. Yet, to watch them, you would say that Willie Baxter and his satellites had to prove their juvenility.

Richard Whorf, gone in for direction, has urged them to be young, even if it hurts them. And it does. I was alive in 1917 and young people did not act that way. They may not have acted as sensibly as today, but they did not act as foolishly as in this musical "Seventeen."

This, by the way, is the second musical "Seventeen," which also has been a silent-picture, a talking-picture and a play. Called "Hello, Lola," the first musical "Seventeen" was at the Eltinge a quarter of a century ago. Willie Baxter got into "more or less comic trouble" even then . . .

Thanks, of course, to Lola Pratt, the "baby talk lady."

* * *

Willie Baxter gets into more or less comic trouble now. Only, I fear, it is less comic than it was. I cannot see why he wants a dress suit in the first place. None of the other boys has one. Or shows any signs of wanting one, although they are crazy about the visiting Miss Pratt.

And why they—and he—are crazy about the visiting Miss Pratt I do not know. She is not a bad looking girl, as young blondes go. But she is not a good looking girl, either. She is just a girl with a dog named Flopit as opposed to a dog named Clem. Clem is short for Clementina.

Lola Pratt turns the Indianapolis of 1907 upside down, the